

Report of the subcommittee on retrenchment of journalists during COVID-19

Terms of reference	3
History	3
First round of letters	4
Mode of gathering information	8
Letter to labour commissioners	8
Testimonials from public hearings	10
Trends and Findings	14
Recommendations	17
Further research	18

Terms of reference

The Press Council of India is a quasi-judicial statutory authority, set up by an Act of for maintaining and improving the standards of and news in India. It has been mandated to keep check on such developments which have the tendency to affect the freedom of Press.

Soon after the COVID-19 pandemic broke in India in March 2020, the Press Council began receiving complaints and reports about newspaper managements – large, medium and small – retrenching or seeking resignations on a mass scale from journalists and other staff. This was a matter of serious concern and the Council took *suo-motu* cognizance of the widespread job losses.

The Inquiry Committee of the Council while considering these matters in its meeting held on 10 December 2020 inter-alia recommended as follows: "One of the objectives of the Council is to preserve the freedom of press and to keep under review any development likely to restrict the supply and dissemination of news of public interest and importance. Security of service is a basic requirement for independence of journalists and once it is threatened, freedom is compromised.

"Undoubtedly, a large number of journalists have lost their jobs in the recent period. For its comprehensive study, the Inquiry Committee deems it expedient to constitute a Committee consisting of Shri Rakesh Sharma (Rashtrdoot) and Shri Jaishankar Gupta, Members of the Press Council of India in which Shri P Sainath, Shri Krishna Prasad and Shri Gurbir Singh are included as co-opted Members. Shri Jaishankar Gupta will be the Convenor of the Sub-Committee. It is made clear that the Sub-Committee is not to examine the service conditions of each of the employees who have lost their jobs."

History

A large number of journalists in India lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Security of service is a basic requirement for independence of journalists and once it is threatened, freedom is compromised.

For a comprehensive study of the issue, during its 13th term, the Press Council of India (PCI) constituted a sub-committee in its meeting on 10 December 2020. The sub-committee consisted of Rakesh Sharma of the Rashtrdoot, and Jaishankar Gupta of Press Association. Senior journalists P Sainath, Krishna Prasad and Gurbir Singh, were coopted as members of the sub-committee. The sub-committee was convened by Jaishankar Gupta and it was made clear that examination of service conditions / employer-employee relations of journalists would not be in the ambit of the sub-committee.

The sub-committee held its first meeting 21 January 2021. Jaishankar Gupta, Convenor of the Sub-Committee opined that the issue is within the purview of the Council as it is concerning security of the journalists. He stated that incidents of job losses are under-reported while the extent of actual happenings are many times more.

In the meeting, Rakesh Sharma opined that the pandemic had not only affected journalists but also impacted the newspaper industry big, medium and small, the printing press and their workers. The crises, therefore, should be looked into, in totality. He suggested also examining the problems faced by medium and small newspapers.

Gurbir Singh suggested the sub-committee address issues affecting press freedom and factors related to job loss. He suggested that the information about the sub-committee be publicised so that affected journalists may approach it and apprise it of their plight.

P Sainath stated that job security is an important area, linked with the freedom of a journalist working within an organisation. He further suggested preparing a questionnaire seeking details on the number of journalists retrenched, sacked and forced into voluntary retirement.

Krishna Prasad suggested that the sub-committee schedule sittings in different cities and hear affected journalists as it was a pan India issue.

The Secretary, PCI stated that during the course of hearing of a case, it was observed that a leading newspaper in Uttar Pradesh has sought resignation from a journalist for his critical writing. The editor of the said newspaper informed that he was not a regular employee but Hobby Contributor. Therefore, the newspaper has no responsibility.

The sub-committee also opined that it should also look at the following issues:

- Forced resignation
- VRS
- Hobby Contributor
- Contracts which have not been renewed
- Changes in terms of employment
- Actual terminations

The sub-committee further opined that the managements of media houses have retrenched, cut salaries and fired employees using the pandemic as a justification. In fact, they were planning for it much before the COVID-19.

The sub-committee decided to prepare a questionnaire and send the same to the management of media groups for their inputs in the matter. The questionnaire was prepared by P Sainath. It was further decided to hold its next meeting after inputs being received from the media groups and organisations. The questionnaire, prepared by the sub-committee on the issue related to retrenchment of journalists by media groups between March 2020 and February 2021, was forwarded to the various media house vide Council's letter dated 15 March 2021 with a request to provide the necessary information and details.

First round of letters

The following two-part questionnaire was sent to The Telegraph, Hindustan Times Media Ltd, Times Group, Sakal Times, Gomantak Times, Vikatan Media Group, The Hindu, Business Standard, Daily Etemaad and The Siasat Daily on 15 March 2021.

Questionnaire — Part I

Relating to shutdowns, retrenchments, job losses, retirements, contract terminations (or non-renewals), resignations — during the pandemic-lockdown period

1. What has been the change in strength of your total staff (including editorial staff)? What was the total staff strength between March, 2020 and February, 2021? Please include stringers and 'hobby correspondents' in this list.
2. Kindly provide the following details about the employees, who either resigned (including those who retired early) or were terminated (including those for a brief period under Leave Without Pay--LWP) by the organisation:

Name of the employee, who resigned	Month/date/year of resignation and where they were based at the time of resignation	Reasons of Resignation	Years Of service in the organisation	Compensation offered by the organisation	Terms of resignation on organisation	Relevant clauses from the company laws on employees resignation	Copy of resignation letter attached

Name of the employee-terminated permanently or for short term under LWP	Month/date/year of termination -- where they were based at the time of termination	Reasons of termination	Years of service in the organisation	Compensation offered by the organisation	Terms of termination on	Relevant clauses from the company laws on employee termination	Copy of termination letter attached

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

3. Did your organisation institute any form of salary cuts March, 2020 and February, 2021? Kindly provide the following details-
- Details and scope Of the salary cuts
 - Copies of communication regarding salary cuts sent out to employees,
 - Details about consent of employees or employee unions taken for salary cuts, indicating how this consent was sought.
 - Details regarding restoration of salaries of employees, who had suffered salary cuts,
 - Please provide details of when, where and which sections of employees have had their salaries restored.
4. How many departments, supplements, editions, bureaus, centres, newspapers, magazines, channels has your organisation closed/shut down or restructured between March, 2020 and February, 2021?

Kindly provide--

- Details of the closings or shutdowns undertaken.
- Information on restructuring in various departments etc.
- Communication to employees regarding closings or shutdowns Of departments, beats, supplements, editions, bureaus, centres, newspapers, magazines, channels within your organisation

Questionnaire — Part 2

Relating to specific Covid-19 impact on journalist and non-journalist employees, protocols and measures taken for their safety and well-being

1. How many employees of your organisation tested positive for COVID-19 (from March 2020 to February 2021)? Kindly provide the following details:

Name of the employee who tested positive for COVID-19	Age of the employee	Position of the employee in the organisation	City/town, District State of (he affected employee	Recovered from COVID 19 Or succumbed to it?	In case of death the reported cause of the same

2. Please provide copies of protocols issued by your organisation to employees in the field, working from office and working from home — advising them on protecting themselves from COVID-19.
3. Please provide details of the number of PPEs, sanitisers, masks, gloves, etc. issued to individual employees of your organisation working in the field, working from the office, and those working from home.

4. Kindly list departments currently working from home and from office — and the numbers of employees in each.
5. Please provide copies of rules issued by your organisation for working from home, including the weekly offs that employees are entitled to at present. Indicate the changes, if any, in the number of weekly offs since 2019.
6. Did your organisation make any special provisions in the light of the COVID-19 outbreak? With reference to leaves, medical costs, medical insurance etc. for employees who test positive for COVID-19? Please provide copies of documents outlining these entitlements to employees via medical insurance, including rules issued by your organisation for employees in quarantine, isolation.
7. Please provide details of the measures taken to address mental health issues at your organisation.
8. Has COVID-19 affected your circulation, viewership numbers? May we have a comparison of your circulation, viewership numbers between March 2020 and February, 2021 on a month-on-month basis? Please provide advertisement revenue between March 2020 and February 2021.
9. How did COVID impact advertisement revenue for your company between March, 2020 and February, 2021? What were the comparatives for the corresponding months in March 2019 and February 2021?

The Telegraph and the Times Group in their reply to the questionnaire submitted that the issue of journalist exits/exits/terminations concerns employer-employee relations which is beyond the jurisdiction of the Press Council of India. Sakal Times and Gomantak Times stated that the employees resigned voluntarily and that their print editions were closed permanently. Neither company mentioned the number of journalists affected. The Vikatan Media Group stated that 100 employees resigned and left the company, and that an employee who was retrenched on 8 July 2020, had raised a dispute before the authorities under the Industrial Dispute Act.

The Hindu submitted that it had closed its Mumbai edition in July 2020. The company did not share the number of journalists affected. Hindustan Times Media Ltd replied that the company had complied with legal obligations and any employee with grievances should approach the appropriate forum under the labour laws. The company also highlighted that the print media "is on the brink of an imminent collapse, which shall necessarily result in loss of even more jobs and may also cause irrecoverable loss and damage to print media." While sharing the following financial results of their company for Q1 2021 as submitted to stock exchanges, the company failed to mention the number of journalists affected:

"Revenue in Q4 2020 (Jan-March 2020) is down by 19% Vs Q3 2020, which has Covid19 of only a week.

"Revenue of Q1 2021 (April-June 2020) is down by 70% Vs Q1 2020 and is only 30% of normal revenue."

Business Standard submitted that the company retrenched its employees within the parameters of law, including the provisions of the Industrial Dispute Act, 1947. It further submitted that the company was constrained to retrench its employees due to the impact of

the COVID-19 pandemic. It caused "...a drastic drop in newspaper copy sales, disruption in distribution network, drastic reduction in the revenues from advertisement, huge financial losses etc." The company also submitted that it paid the full retrenchment compensation along with all other statutory payments to the employees and also "simultaneously intimated appropriate Government(s) and the concerned Labour Authorities as per law". The company did not share any information on the number of journalists affected.

Meanwhile, on 2 April 2021, Om Prakash Khemkarni, member PCI representing Hindi Samachar Patra Sammelan and All India Newspaper Editor's Conference, apprised the sub-committee via an email, the data collected independently by a fellow member of PCI, Balwinder Singh Jammu of the Indian Journalists Union. Balwinder Singh Jammu documented 2,500 job losses in different news organisations across India.

Besides the proposals and questionnaire framed and circulated by the sub-committee, and the tabling of the responses of various media houses, the 'Covid-19' sub-committee could not make much headway because of continuing lockdown conditions in that period. Work of the committee was also hampered by several of its members themselves contracting the Covid virus. The existence of the committee finally lapsed after the Pres Council ended its 13th term in October 2021.

At a meeting in Soochana Bhavan on 26 May 2023, the council resolved to constitute a sub-committee again, as the previous sub-committee could not function as the term of the Council expired. The new sub-committee comprised the following members:

1. Prof JS Rajput
2. Gurbir Singh
3. Prajnananda Chaudhuri
4. L.C. Bhartiya

Further, P. Sainath and Snehasis Sur, senior journalists were coopted as members of the sub-committee. In August 2023, Cyril Sam, journalist, was also inducted as a 'researcher' to assist the sub-committee with data collection, analysis, research and drafting.

Mode of gathering information

The sub-committee subsequently met on 13 October 2023 at Soochana Bhawan. At the meeting, it was decided to take the following three approaches to collect information on journalist retrenchments,

1. Send letters to state labour commissioners
2. Inform stakeholders via a press release and circulate an online form to collect information,
3. Hold public hearings in Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata.

The following letter was drafted and sent across to all the state labour commissioners,

Letter to labour commissioners

Subcommittee on the Study of Journalists' Retrenchment during COVID-19

Dear Madam (Sir),

The Press Council of India (PCI) is studying the impact of COVID-19 on news media in India. As part of the study, the Subcommittee on study on retrenchment of journalists during Covid-19 pandemic is reaching out to you seeking details of journalists and hobby contributors (stringers) associated with print and broadcast news media organisations who were retrenched--laid off, forced to take VRS, put on furlough, put on leave without pay, asked or forced to resign, terminated from their positions, affected by non-renewal or changed terms of contract, etc.--during the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020-February 2021).

We request your cooperation and are hoping that you share the data (notified under section 70c of the The Industrial Relations Code, 2020) on journalists and hobby contributors who were retrenched--laid off, forced to take VRS, put on furlough, put on leave without pay, asked or forced to resign, terminated from their positions, affected by non renewal or changed terms of contract, etc.--under your jurisdiction during the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020-February 2021) in the following format by 30 September 2023.

Name of the print or broadcast news media organisations	Name of the employee terminated permanently or for short term under LWP	Month/date/year of termination-where they were based at the time of termination	Reasons of termination	Years of service in the organisation	Terms of termination	Relevant clauses from the company laws on employee termination	Copy of termination letter attached

Under the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, any company employing over 100 workers, needs government permission to lay off employees. Further, the company needs to inform the labour commissioners before laying off employees. However, in their replies, labour commissioners claimed they were unaware of any job losses in their respective jurisdictions.

Simultaneously, the following press release was published on 13 September 2023 by the PCI to circulate a google form to collect data:

Sub-Committee to examine the retrenchment journalists by Media Groups during COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020-February 2021)

The Press Council of India is a quasi-judicial statutory authority, set up by Act of Parliament i.e., Press Council Act, 1978 with the two fold objects of preserving the of the Press and of maintaining improving the standards of newspapers and news agencies in India. One of the objectives of the Council is to preserve the freedom of press and to keep under review any development likely to restrict the supply and dissemination of news of public interest and importance.

It has set up a sub-committee to comprehensive study of retrenchment of journalists by the media group during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Sub-Committee consists of Shri Gurbir Singh, Shri LC.Bhartiya, Shri Prajnananda Chaudhuri, Prof. JS. Rajput, along with Shri P.Sainath and Shri Snehasis Sur, journalists as co-opted members. The sub-committee is seeking details from journalists who were retrenched during the COVID-19 pandemic(March 2020-February 2021).

Journalists who were retrenched during the pandemic are requested to fill the online form at the following web link: <https://forms.gle/jYefVsUTxSPav7Ld6> or email at: secy-pci@nic.in or write at the following address: The Secretary, Press Council of India, Soochana Bhawan, 8-CGO Complex, Lodhi Road, New Delhi-110003 so as to reach by 29th September, 2023. The form can also be accessed from Council's website www.presscouncil.nic.in at home page as well as under the sub-link of Menu as → Media > Press Release.

It may be noted that this is an exercise towards collection of data which is purely an academic exercise and shall form part of the Report. It is clarified that study being academic is not intended to provide any relief. Moreover, granting any relief on such matters is not within the power and ambit of the Press Council of India.

Subsequently, public hearings were held at the Press Club of India, Delhi, on 28th October 2023, Mumbai Press Club, Mumbai, 4th November 2023 and at the Press Club, Kolkata on 2nd November, 2024.

At the public hearings, journalists who deposed were first asked to fill an online form and then encouraged to share their stories in an unstructured manner. This was followed up with two questions:

1. What are your grievances?

2. What are your demands of the Press Council of India?

Testimonials from public hearings

The depositions by journalists at the physical hearings and submissions to the online form make it evident that most of those retrenched were coerced to resign from their positions or terminated without notice. In an email to her colleagues, Kavitha Iyer, associate editor of the *Indian Express* in Mumbai wrote:

'At this meeting on Friday, I was requested to leave my phones outside. The HR manager who was also in the cabin said I would 'have to resign' and accept the relieving letter that was in the brown envelope in his hand, or I would be terminated and receive a termination letter..

"In any case, there was no need to apply any thought to the decision itself. Resign or be terminated is not really a choice once Option A and Option B for severance pay are explained

' The HR manager said he'd need a half hour to check my gratuity fund, but when I said I'd prefer to wait outside while he checked, he very kindly made a call and got the information in an instant. I asked if they felt this was morally acceptable to them, to not let an employee of many years take a little time to process what was happening. I don't know exactly why I needed to get out of that room. Maybe I just needed to breathe. It was dehumanising. 'Why don't you understand,' the HR manager said.

' .Had I received a call a few days in advance, explaining that the inevitable is about to happen, that this is a business decision with no bearing on the work I do, I would have still been unhappy to exit, but would have retained my pride in this organisation and its commitment to humanity. Sadly, we are all now a little less human and a little more virus."

The letter was publicly published in 2020 with Iyer's permission by Cyril Sam as part of his research into retrenchments by news media organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic. She was retrenched from The Indian Express' bureau in Mumbai on 27 July 2020. She had spent 18 years of her career with the publication. Between 11 July 2020 and 30 July 2020, the English daily retrenched at least 35-40 journalists, across various verticals and publications. Iyer is currently working as a freelance journalist.

Nearly every journalist who deposed before the subcommittee in New Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata and participated in the online survey, narrated a similar experience. Common across all the depositions was the choice offered to journalists by employers, as pointed out by Iyer in her email--resign or be terminated.

Ashish Rukhaiyar, who was terminated on 19 June, 2020 from *The Hindu* newspaper as the markets editor, described the experience in an open letter on LinkedIn to news organisations on 3 August 2020: "Reporters were sacked over the phone. Some were called to the office and told to submit their resignation on the spot. News about discontinuation were pasted on notice boards. They were threatened that if they do not resign, they would lose out on

payouts they are entitled to under law. There was absolutely no method in this madness. No memos, no performance related warnings, no red flags in appraisals, etc. "

Journalists who deposed and submitted responses to the online survey, reported adverse impact on mental health and self esteem. Deepak Turbhekar, a photographer employed by the Bennett, Coleman Co's *Mumbai Mirror*, was asked to resign in January 2021 by the HR over a WhatsApp call. "I ignored the first request for resignation and was subsequently harassed multiple times a day over a period of few weeks on WhatsApp calls," he told the subcommittee. "I was threatened that not resigning would lead to termination. Which will further lead to my provident fund, gratuity and other benefits, being held back." He eventually resigned because of the fear of future job prospects becoming inaccessible were he to be terminated.

Turbhekar broke down before the subcommittee when he spoke about his financial condition. He has been struggling financially for three years. He was paid one month's salary as compensation by the publication after having worked for it for 16 years. He used up the PF money to repay his home loan in Mumbai and surrendered his insurance for a mortgage. Further, he was forced to sell his wife's jewellery to support his elder daughter's education. He has a younger son studying in third standard. "I don't have money to buy equipment for photography and am no longer doing news photography as it isn't sustainable. Freelance news photographers are paid between INR100-INR125 per photo. I see no hope for the future," he told the subcommittee, while wiping tears from his face.

Sunita Tewari was asked to resign from *Nandan* magazine on 30 August 2020. She had been associated with the Hindustan Digital Streams, a sister concern of the Hindustan Times Ltd., for over 20 years. "During the COVID-19 pandemic we started work early in the morning at 3am-4am. On 30 August, I got a call from the HR department asking me to come to the office. The long working hours were affecting my health. It was deteriorating as I was suffering from diabetes and heart issues. I informed HR about my health and inability to come to the office. The HR insisted that I come and sent a vehicle to pick me up. At the office, I was asked to resign. I gave all my life to my work. I was shocked when it happened, my diabetes shot up and subsequently, I was diagnosed with depression," Tewari deposed before the subcommittee in Delhi.

Tewari further reported spots across her body, including visible patches across her hands, face and legs due to worsened diabetes and stress during the period. "It felt like we were all a family at the *Hindustan Times*, which is navigating a river on a boat and when a problem appeared, a part of the family was left to drown while others moved ahead. We dedicated our lives for the organisation and in a sudden swoop, without thinking of any of us, we were terminated," she said. Tewari also faced disruption in her family life, including the death of her husband following the retrenchment. She further reported that a co-worker Santosh Gupta, a designer at the organisation, died by suicide after being retrenched.

Madhur Tankha was retrenched from *The Hindu* newspaper on 1 July 2020 after 18 years of working at the publication. "I was already experiencing stress before being terminated. My mother was unwell and my neighbourhood had been declared a containment zone. At the time, I was physically going to the office three days a week and even working on Sundays. I

received the termination email at 10pm. I was not served any notice. It was unfair and my mental health worsened," Tankha deposed before the subcommittee in New Delhi.

Journalists also reported adverse impact on financial stability following retrenchments. During the pandemic, they were spending from their own pockets for PPE kits, masks and other safety gear. It is important to highlight that journalists, especially reporters and photographers, were working from the field in hazardous conditions during the pandemic and the nationwide lockdown, while desk editors were expected to work from offices.

Tankha wrote to the PCI but has yet to receive a reply, he claimed.

Prashant Nakwe, photo editor of the *The Hindu*, Mumbai told the subcommittee, "We were expected to file daily pictures during the pandemic and were not provided with any safety gear or compensated for out of pocket expenses incurred for safety gear." Nakwe was terminated from the publication on 22 June 2020 by email. Like Turbhekar, Nakwe too admits that freelancing is unsustainable. His wife was forced to start a home-cooked food and tiffin business following his retrenchment. Nakwe has since been helping her with her enterprise. "Now the kitchen knife is more often in my hand than the camera," he told the subcommittee.

Nakwe was among a group of journalists associated with *The Hindu*, who filed a complaint with the labour commissioner. The case is progressing at a slow pace, he lamented.

After being forced to resign from *Punya Nagari*, a Marathi daily, in September 2020, Ramesh Parse had no option but to turn to odd jobs to feed his family. "I returned to my village and engaged in agricultural labour to sustain myself and my family. I was still without a job a year later and I drove an auto in Mumbai for eight months. I was lucky to have a driving license and 'badge' as an auto driver before I joined journalism," Parse deposed before the subcommittee.

Prashant Barsingh was terminated from Sakal newspaper in Mumbai on 14 August 2020 by email at 9.45pm. At the time, he had an outstanding home loan of INR 29,00,000, which he had taken the same year for a government allotted flat. Barsingh was working as a political reporter for the publication at the time. He hasn't been able to pay the monthly instalments for the loans regularly in the past three years. He suffered a brain stroke due to financial stress.

While highlighting why many journalists choose not to speak about retrenchments, Barsingh told the subcommittee, "Journalists are scared of approaching courts or challenging decisions for the fear of being blacklisted and not being hired. We raise voices for others, however, when it comes to us, we have nowhere to go. Even if we were to raise voices, we would get blacklisted." Barsingh raised a complaint with the labour commissioner but is dissatisfied with the slow progress of the case. The fear of being blacklisted by news organisations, if they were to pursue legal options, was raised by multiple other journalists. Barsingh has been freelancing and was still unemployed during the time of his deposition.

Raja Adate, representing the Akhil Bharatiya Marathi Patrakar Parishad, estimates that at least 650 members of his organisation lost their jobs during the pandemic. "For district level journalists, there is an additional burden of getting advertisements for news organisations and meeting financial targets," Adate told the subcommittee. Unmet financial targets are deducted from the salary, he added. He was forced to get a stent in his heart following the pressure of getting advertisements. Adate was asked to resign from *Pudhari*, a Marathi daily, in September 2020. He was working as the political editor of the newspaper from Mumbai. "I was promised that I will be hired back after four months but there has been no communication from the publication after I submitted my resignation," he told the subcommittee. He further highlighted, "I was interviewed by another publication for the position of political editor but was told in clear terms that there was no need to chase stories instead I should help the publication get government advertisements." Adate was among the journalists who raised the issue of being blacklisted. "Journalists are scared of speaking out or filing complaints for the fear of being blacklisted," he told the subcommittee.

Shruti Ganpatye was among the few journalists who chose not to resign, when presented with the choice between resignation and termination at the *Mumbai Mirror*. She was eventually terminated. "There were repeated calls to resign from the HR on WhatsApp. The calls were made on WhatsApp to avoid recording," she said in her deposition before the subcommittee in Mumbai. "Only basic salary for the last two months was offered as retrenchment compensation. Only 3 persons including me, of an estimated 100 employees who lost their jobs in the Mumbai Mirror, refused to resign and were eventually terminated. I wrote emails asking for more compensation, however, there was no response from the company," she added. Shruti has since been freelancing. She admits her financial situation is precarious. However, for her, the uncertainty and instability in journalism continues to be an apprehension in returning to journalism. Shruti ultimately left the profession and has taken an assignment with the UNICEF.

Trends and Findings

The first COVID-19 lockdown was announced on 24 March 2020 by the Government of India as a preventive measure against the pandemic. India had the most stringent lockdown globally, according to the Stringency Index¹ developed by the University of Oxford. The severity of the lockdown caused one of the biggest mass migrations in modern history after the partition of the Indian subcontinent following the suspension of passenger trains on 23 March 2020². It also exacerbated the economic slowdown India had been experiencing and increased household debt³. Lockdown restrictions were lifted in seven phases between June 2020 and December 2020.

During the period the news industry, particularly print, faced multiple disruptions including collapse of circulation, advertising and fear of infection spreading through newspaper⁴.

¹ <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/coronavirus-india-lockdown-vs-global-lockdown-covid-19-deaths-cases-cure-6399181/>

² <https://www.thehindu.com/specials/lockdown-displaces-lakhs-of-migrants/article56832346.ece>

³ https://rbi.org.in/scripts/BS_ViewBulletin.aspx/Record/1564636/BS_ViewBulletin.aspx?Id=20143

⁴ <https://theprint.in/india/covid-19-hits-print-media-hard-ads-and-circulation-dip-editions-see-major-digital-push/388514/>

Multiple newspapers and editions were shut down, especially those with smaller circulations, serving smaller centres, towns and districts.

Even as economic activity came to a standstill and cities wore a deserted look, journalists were reporting from the ground and working from offices and homes. The pandemic had a severe impact on the mental health of journalists covering COVID-19, according to various global studies^{5 6 7}. There are no similar studies that look at the impact of the pandemic on journalists in India.

According to depositions made to the committee, journalists in India were working extended hours on the frontlines, including newsrooms, hospitals, quarantine zones, crematoriums, etc. without any institutional support with respect to safety protocols or gear. At least two newsrooms emerged as a COVID-19 hotspots spreading the virus through their communities, according to reports by The Caravan magazine and Newslaundry.

According to data collated by the Network of Women in Media, India⁸, 626 journalists from India died on the line of duty during the period, as the COVID-19 infection affected newsrooms⁹ and journalists¹⁰. The situation was further aggravated by forced salary cuts and mass retrenchments, severely impacting the financial and mental health of journalists.

Independent estimates by Balwinder Singh Jammu, former PCI member and Cyril Sam, an independent journalist put the number of those retrenched between 2,500-2,300. The exact numbers are likely higher considering their data is mostly restricted to large publications in English-language media.

In total, 51 journalists representing 17 unique news organisations across English, Hindi, Marathi and Bangla languages, and 12

⁵ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/covid-19-hurting-journalists-mental-health-news-outlets-should-help-them-now>

⁶ <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/11/7/e045675>

⁷ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KrkeWQdaAgXtIleWsYuuJctg3Qikk2Pj/view>

⁸ https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX_1vTkXC1UzWBeXiz39WHroeqlYml9WJui-SbQlu7nANI0zjC-c0jp_maF0XeTNAqOg/pub

⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52464029>

¹⁰ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/indian-journalists-death-toll-reaches-474-more-voices-call-covid-19-protection>

journalist unions, associations deposited before the committee in New Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata. Nearly 80% of those who deposited were from three major publishers the BCCL (19), HT Media (14) and The Hindu Publishing Group (THG) (8). Journalists from English-language news media based in New Delhi and Mumbai represent a bulk of those who deposited before the committee.

Most among those affected were men aged between 35-years and 60-years. Only five women journalists deposited before the committee. Among those who deposited, only 15 (29.4%) are currently employed in full-time journalism jobs. Majority (70%) journalists who deposited reported being either unemployed--14 (27.5%)--or being self-employed--22 (43%)--in various other professions, including engaging in occasional freelance journalism. Freelance journalism was described as unsustainable by those who are self-employed and continue to be unemployed.

Current employment status

51 responses



Based on the data from physical hearings, it is evident that while a bulk of the layoffs happened between June 2020 and September 2020, they started weeks before the first COVID-19 lockdown and continued until March 2021. At many news organisations, retrenchments were done in batches. The data is consistent with independent data shared by Balwinder Singh and Cyril Sam. Retrenchments were accompanied by arbitrary cuts in wages beginning April 2020. Wage cuts ranged from 20%-50%.

Journalists who deposited before the committee felt the process of retrenchments and salary cuts were unfair. Only 25% of journalists received formal emails from their companies about retrenchments. In nearly 75% cases, all communications regarding retrenchments were oral. At the physical hearings, 80% journalists claimed they received no advance notice or formal communication about salary cuts and retrenchments.

Were you given an advance notice?
50 responses



Among the big three English-language publishers represented in the depositions, while most employed by THG reported receiving advance written notice and a formal letter of severance, only few journalists at the BCCL and HT Media reported receiving any written communication regarding the retrenchments. The pattern of informal, oral communication over voice over IP applications about retrenchments were also reported by journalists from smaller organisations and journalist unions.

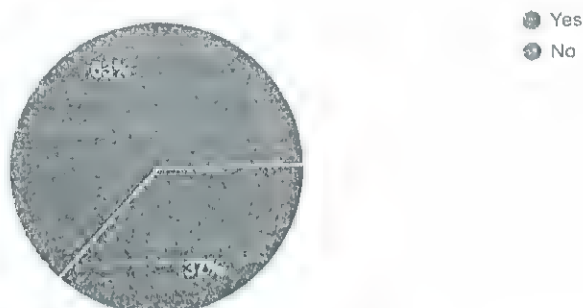
Please select the mode of retrenchment?
49 responses



Majority (80%) journalists were forced to resign, opt for voluntary retirements, and terminated from their positions by their news organisations. Many of those who deposed felt they were personally targeted for their work.

Were you paid the severance pay mentioned in your contract?

46 responses



Further, only 17 (37%) retrenched journalists reported receiving severance pay. Among those who deposed, 44 (80%) reported being impacted financially, 34 reported dipping into family savings, while 17 were forced to take loans and 12 journalists were forced to relocate.

The retrenchments emotionally affected 40 (80%) journalists who deposed before the committee. Retrenchments also impacted the self-worth and the confidence of 40 (80%) journalists. Depression was reported by 30 (60%) journalists and 27 (54%) experienced social withdrawal. Senior journalists, in particular, were emotionally most affected. This was also witnessed in physical hearings where many senior journalists experienced emotional turmoil and were moved to tears.

All journalist unions raised the issue of service conditions--lack of written contracts, terms on employment contracts, financial and advertising targets--and their violations by news organisations. Further, they demanded regulation of journalist contracts, including demanding overtime benefits, mandatory disbursement of wage board dues, health insurance, that the PCI dictate the terms of service conditions of journalists, etc.. Unions also raised the issue of accreditation, which they claimed are quota-based, and deny majority journalists access to government benefits and schemes.

The above conditions were exacerbated by the casual approach by news media companies and the state and central government to the directives of the Union government to treat news media persons as 'essential workers'. Further, the Ministry of Labour and Employment published an advisory on 20th March 2020, asking "all the Employers of Public/Private Establishments... to extend their coordination by not terminating their employees, particularly casual or contractual workers from job or reduce their wages" (https://web.archive.org/web/20200401234544/https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/Central_Government_Update.pdf)

It may be mentioned that that the Government of India for the first time, declared news media as an 'essential service' immediately following the Prime Minister's first speech on 24th March 2020. (https://www.mofpi.gov.in/sites/default/files/mha_order_and_guidline_as_on_24.03_2020.pdf)

Further, the Ministry of Labour and Employment published an advisory on 20th March 2020, asking "all the Employers of Public/Private Establishments... to extend their coordination by not terminating their employees, particularly casual or contractual workers from job or reduce their wages"

The logical inference that follows (and the Union government also made this clear), was that essential workers like health and hospital staff/ municipal workers/ and news media, cannot be fired or transferred or their benefits restricted, and that they are to be allowed free movement to pursue their duties during the lockdown and crisis period.

The reasoning for including the news media in the 'essential workers' category was a recognition that the circulation of news and information is especially very important during a crisis period when people are struggling to cope with the changing pandemic situation on a daily basis, and when rumour mills in the unofficial channels of information are clouding people's understanding. However, we have to record that this 'essential workers' directive was ignored by most of the media companies, and they showed scant respect to the Union government's directive, firing and retrenching journalists at will.

It also must be mentioned that though the Union government made the announcement of 'essential workers' covering journalists, little was done to implement it in spirit. State governments made very little provision for ensuring the safe travel, providing safety gear and food and daily provisions for journalists. As an example, when journalists in Mumbai and Maharashtra appealed to the state government to give 'essential worker' status and allow media persons to use the local trains and transport without hindrance, then Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray, rejected the demand. Requests by journalist representatives to then deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar to intervene and prevent wholesale terminations of media persons by companies also fell on deaf ears.

Recommendations

Facing economic, technological and social headwinds, news media is struggling globally. India is no exception. Journalists and democracies are at the receiving end of this turmoil.

The prime objective of the PCI is to safeguard the freedom of the press. The PCI also works to create an environment where journalists can do their job freely and without fear. It has been rightly noted in the 'objectives' for setting up this sub-committee that: if journalists do not have job security then at that very juncture the freedom of press is compromised.

Among the principal factors that allowed companies and newspapers to shed employees so widely and carelessly is because of the existing contract system and 'casual' system of employment in place where the lack of a formal appointment letter, term contracts or even an ID card is denied. In this situation, rights that normally should accrue to a journalist as an 'employee' were routinely denied during the COVID-19 pandemic. Journalists and their unions who deposed before the committee highlighted that normal employment terms like written contracts, health insurance, PF, gratuity payments, are not present in the media

industry thus allowing a hire-and-fire regime. The poor job security for journalists made them particularly vulnerable during the COVID-19 period where some managements appeared to use the pandemic financial crisis as an excuse to downsize employment levels much beyond what could be justified by their financial requirements.

In this situation, some government and industry bodies should take the following steps to ensure better security for journalists:

1. **Model contracts should provide security during crisis:** (a) While the law prohibits employing a person on contract for jobs of a perennial nature, the sub-committee found the 'contract system' had entrenched itself in the industry as a system of employment. The committee, therefore, urges upon the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and the Ministry of Law and Justice to introduce a Model Contract for journalists with certain mandatory clauses which may inter alia include minimum tenure of service--7-10 years, provision of giving PF, Gratuity, ESI in applicable cases, provision for leave, yearly increment in salary etc. Since it is found that contracts entered into with journalists by some media companies are one-sided favouring the company, it is advisable that the Ministry of Law and Justice involve journalists and their representative bodies when drawing up the model contracts.

(b) It was also found that journalists were retrenched after being paid minimum or no compensation at the time of retrenchment. The Model Contract should therefore ensure protection till the end of the contract or a severance payout of a minimum of 6 months of salary as a safety net, unless there is a situation where disciplinary action needs to be for violation of law or service rules.
2. **Awareness of rights:** It was observed that while most journalists demanded a model contract, most were unaware of their rights as journalists. The Sub-Committee recommends that the Union government, through central and state labour departments, and bodies representing journalists, widely disseminate a checklist that can be used by journalists to identify commonly misleading, unlawful and unethical clauses in employment contracts.
3. **Insurance for journalists:** The committee urges news media companies to work closely with banking and insurance companies and regulators to work with news media companies to ensure journalists are insured against force majeure events such as global pandemics and natural calamities. Further, the committee is of the view that health insurance should be extended by employers to journalists and their dependents for 6 months to one year from the date of termination, if they are retrenched for reasons other than related to their quality of work.
4. **Fast-track pending labour disputes:** The sub-committee observed that a large number of journalists and unions had filed complaint letters as well as legal proceedings before labour commissioners and Industrial and Labour courts. Perhaps, due to the pandemic there was initially a slow response and disposal rate. However, in the post-pandemic period these should have been taken up on a priority basis.

However, the tardy response from the legal system has further demoralized journalists and left them with little confidence that they will be heard and their issues settled.

As it is said, justice delayed, is justice denied. Even the Press Council requests for all state and Central Labour Commissioners to provide retrenchment/termination details during the pandemic elicited hardly any response. In this situation, Central and state governments must act expeditiously and direct the state labour machinery to give priority and fast-track complaints and disputes raised by journalists in respect of their termination and/or failure to settle legal dues owed to them. Further, where it is found that retrenchments and terminations of journalists are illegal or without due process of law, the consequent benefits of reinstatement and payment of wages and benefits for the period of retrenchment/termination should follow. The Ministry of Law and Justice, in conjunction with the Ministry of Labour, must assist in this process of ensuring justice to those who were denied their rightful wages and benefits during the Covid period.

5. **Providing safety gear:** Depositions before the sub-committee amply revealed the poor importance given to providing safe working conditions by news companies during the pandemic months. Journalists, especially photographers, were on the frontline during the pandemic and required to visit hospitals, cemeteries and contagion areas. Yet very few companies provided necessary gear like hazmat protective suits and N95 grade respirators or SOPs to their reporting staff to prevent infection from the Covid-19 virus. The central government health ministry must look into these complaints and draft a legally enforceable safety and protection code for employees covering hazardous events like the pandemic.
6. **Easy access to compensation and benefits:** Many of the government benefits provided for those who suffered the pandemic were linked to 'accreditation status'. Union and state governments must consider relaxing the accreditation requirement for accessing government benefits. Journalists unions highlighted that not being 'accredited' or being officially government-recognized had become a common obstacle in accessing government benefits.
7. **Further research:** As technology alters means of news production and in order to avoid legal repercussions, news media organisations have been wrongly categorising journalists as 'content editors', 'producers', 'managers', etc. Further, their workload and work descriptions have changed significantly over the years with the rise of digital media and integrated newsrooms. The Sub-Committee therefore recommends that the Union government should conduct a comprehensive study on the working and socio-economic conditions of journalists, which seems to be particularly grim outside metropolitan cities. The cooperation of bodies representing journalists should be taken for this exercise.

As has been observed in many depositions, the role of advertising sales and other jobs have been rolled into journalism to meet companies' financial targets. This not only compromises the independence of news gathering, but can be one step towards

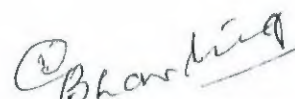
'paid news'. Further work is required in these areas with legal safeguards so that the freedom of the press is not compromised.

8. **Steps to protect mental health:** The high toll in terms of deaths and ailments that struck journalists during the pandemic has left a lasting impression. Moreover, COVID-19 retrenchments, salary deductions, etc. seem to have particularly affected self-worth and mental health of journalists. Journalists were especially vulnerable because they were working from the field, very often without proper safety gear, in highly infectious areas such as densely populated areas, containment zones, closed areas, hospitals, etc.. The continued uncertainty over job security and increasing workload has further affected the mental health of journalists. It is therefore necessary that government health departments in conjunction with news media companies undertake regular surveys and counselling, and help those suffering from mental trauma and other health issues.

Finally, the decline in the reach and financial conditions of the print media has thrown up its own challenges. In this context, the sub-committee recommends that the Union government should continue the mapping of journalist retrenchments on an annual basis. Assistance from the state labour departments and bodies representing journalists should be taken for this annual review of working conditions. As we have seen an unnaturally high level of job losses has an adverse impact on the quality of our information ecosystem and freedom of expression; and regular monitoring will help us deal with the problem more effectively.

21-03-2024


(GURBIR SINGH)
convener, Sub-committee on
impact of Covid-19 on media
Retrenchments.
28/8/24


(K.C. Bhargava)
28/8/24


Rajnanda Chaudhary


J. S. Dey